

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #36: LET YOUR SPEECH BE...PRECISE AND CLEAR

By John Temples

Paul said in Colossians 4:6, “Let your speech always be with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer each one.” May I add a point to what brother Paul said? “Let your speech always be...precise and clear.”

Speech is a marvelous gift from God, but we have cheapened it. Many people’s use of language has gotten coarse and sloppy. Conversation has lost its glitter and sharpness; good grammar and proper spelling are foreign concepts to many. Lots of folks cannot write coherent or intelligent sentences. Prime example: the word “like.” The world’s supply of the word “like” is getting precariously low, because so many are using it multiple times in every sentence. And to make matters worse, they are using it ungrammatically. How “I’m like” ever came to mean “I said,” I’ll never know. But don’t get me started on that.

I want to share two interesting grammatical phenomena. One is good and Biblical, and livens up our language; the other is not so good. And I want to make a few points about both of these in relation to our Christian life.

THE FIRST CATEGORY: REPETITIOUS REDUNDANCIES

Repetitious means saying the same thing more than once in a boring or nonconstructive way. *Redundant* means using unnecessary or superfluous words. So actually, the title of this category (“repetitious redundancies”) is my first glaring example! (It means “repetitious repetitions.”)

We use needless repetition and redundancy a lot. Here are some examples:

Carefully scrutinize
Each and every
Maybe perhaps
Various and sundry
True and accurate

Ridiculous nonsense
Repeating again
Identically the same
A Jewish rabbi
An unknown stranger
An unmarried bachelor
Advance warning
Close proximity
Surrounded on all sides (or completely surrounded)
Troublesome problem
Burning embers
Cash money
Completely annihilate
Over-exaggerate
Past history
ATM machine
PIN number
Regular routine
Perfectly clear
Totally demolished
Accidentally stumble
An armed gunman
Absolute certainty
Unexpected surprise
End result
Future plans
Free gift

But wait, there's more:

Unconfirmed rumor
Join together
Empty space
Exact same
Foreign imports

Return back
Advance warning
All-time record
Safe haven
Tuna fish
Missing gaps
Invited guests
Widow woman
Totally blind
Neat and tidy
True facts
Hot water heater
Completely empty
Exact replica
Free gift

What does this have to do with Christianity and the Bible? Simply that it is possible to be “repetitiously redundant” even when talking about Biblical or religious concepts. Examples:

“*The Holy Bible.*” What other kind of Bible is there? Is there an “unholy Bible”? Well, that one’s probably harmless. But consider:

“*Born-again Christians.*” Why is that redundant? Because the only kind of true Christian there can be is a born-again one! The expression “born-again Christian” implies that there can be Christians who are NOT born again, suggesting a distinction where none exists. Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). All Christians are born again; there’s no other kind!

“*Baptized Christians.*” This one is related to the preceding one.¹ It is redundant because all true Christians by definition have been baptized (immersed). Galatians 3:27 says, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.”

¹ In my first draft I said “closely related,” but that is redundant. Don’t tell anybody.

“Church-of-Christ Christians.” Too horrible to even contemplate or comment on.

“Baptism by immersion.” You hear this one all the time. It implies that there are multiple forms of baptism. But baptism means immersion; so to say “baptism by immersion” is to say “immersion by immersion.”

“A capella singing.” In our worship, we sing without instrumental accompaniment in accordance with the Scriptures (Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16). But a *capella* means, according to Dictionary.com, “choral singing performed without instruments.” No need to say “singing by singing.”

“Trusting faith.” There can be weak faith, but can there be genuine faith that lacks trust in God? There’s no other kind of faith pleasing to God.

You might have noticed that I did not give any Bible examples of repetitious redundancies. That ‘s because there aren’t any--the Holy Spirit would not make that mistake. There are, however, some Bible expressions and Hebrew expressions that seem to be redundant. Here are two examples:

“I will kill her children with death” (Revelation 2:23). This was spoken by Christ to the church at Thyatira, which was allowing a heretical woman (code named “Jezebel” in the text) to lead the people into sexual immorality. (“Her children” refers to her disciples or followers.) There are at least two possible explanations for the seeming redundancy: (1) It is an idiomatic expression of certainty--there will be no “plea bargaining” with God. Albert Barnes says, “[It is] a strong Hebraistic mode of expression, meaning that he would certainly destroy them.” Or (2) “Death” here means plague or pestilence. That seems to be the meaning in Revelation 6:8, where the expression is repeated.

“Blessing I will bless you...multiplying I will multiply you” (Genesis 22:17). Again, the repetition is to emphasize the certainty of God’s promise. Most modern translations say “I will surely (or certainly) bless you.”

THE NEXT CATEGORY: OXYMORONS (CORRECT PLURAL, OXYMORA)

When you put two contradictory words together, either intentionally or unintentionally, you have an oxymoron. So an oxymoron is a contradiction in terms, a phrase consisting of two terms that clash or don't normally go together. Whoever coined the word *oxymoron* must have loved irony, because the word itself is an oxymoron! It comes from the Greek word *oxos* ("sharp") and *moros* ("dull"). Incompatible concepts brought together in a single word!

Oxymora can occur deliberately (for rhetorical effect) or accidentally. Some are real bloopers and are genuinely funny when you notice them. Some examples from everyday usage:

Jumbo shrimp

Definite maybe

Baby grand (piano)

Wake up dead

A fine mess

Work party

Ice water

Silent scream

The living dead

Bitter sweet

Cold sweat

Guest host

Ill health

Lamp shade

Authentic replica

Mobile home

Noble savage

Open secret

Party of one

Random order

Real potential

Removable sticker

Around a corner

Rap music

Boneless ribs
Civil war
Resident alien
All alone
Small crowd
Sweet sorrow
Soft rock
Sight unseen
Dotted line
Zero tolerance
Turn up missing
Good grief
Great Depression
Sanitary landfill
Airline food
Freezer burn
Friendly fire
Holy war
Dress pants
Deafening silence
Virtual reality
Make haste slowly
Pure evil
Icy Hot
Act naturally
Income tax

Are there any oxymora in the Bible? Not in the strict sense of the word; but there are paradoxical expressions put in Scripture by the Holy Spirit to make us stop and think.

A prime example: "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it" (Matthew 10:39). And in Matthew 6:23, Jesus spoke of the light that is in us being darkness. Also 2 Corinthians 12:10--"For when I am weak, then I am strong."

MORE BIBLICAL EXAMPLES OF PARADOXES OR OXYMORON-LIKE STATEMENTS:

Godly jealousy, or a jealous God. How could the true and perfect God be jealous? Yet Exodus 20:5 says, “For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me.” The word *jealous* usually has a bad connotation. But here, it simply means that God will tolerate no rivals. Paul said he was jealous for the Corinthians with a godly jealousy (2 Corinthians 11:2).

A living sacrifice. Romans 12:1 reads, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God; which is your reasonable service.” What a powerful contrast with the dead sacrifices of animals in the Old Testament!

More examples:

- “I die every day” (1 Corinthians 15:31).
- Robes made white by washing in blood (Revelation 7:14).
- A Lamb who is a Lion (Revelation 5:5,6).
- “Wrath of the Lamb” (Revelation 6:16).
- “The foolishness of God” (1 Corinthians 1:25).

So oxymora or paradoxes can be powerful figures of speech that grab our attention and teach powerful lessons. But oxymora can also be unbiblical or misleading, such as:

- “Vacation Bible School.” Well, that one is harmless; but what about--
- Calling Sunday “the Sabbath”?
- “Agreeing to disagree.”
- “Unity in diversity.”
- “A leap of faith” (or “blind faith”).
- “Theistic evolution.”

- “Same-sex marriage”--perhaps the most tragic oxymoron of our time. (“Traditional marriage” is a redundancy, “same-sex marriage” is an oxymoron.)
- “Gender identity”--is that not an oxymoron?

Maybe this article has made you laugh, but I hope it has also made you think. Let us be careful and precise in our use of Biblical concepts and expressions. Away with uncertain sounds! Away with fuzzy, ambiguous, inaccurate, politically correct psycho-babble! Let us speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent. Let us use Bible terms for Bible concepts. Let us not be afraid to tell people what the Bible says. May our words always be kind, but let them be such that no one will question where we stand. “For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:37). --John Temples